

Lebanese Parliament recommends forensic audit of all state institutions

Fri, 2020-11-27 22:45

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Parliament discussed on Friday a letter from President Michel Aoun requesting assistance in the forensic audit of the Banque du Liban's accounts.

The request overthrew the contract that the Lebanese government signed with the restructuring consultancy Alvarez & Marsal to conduct an audit of the central bank's accounts. This is because the Banque du Liban is reluctant to provide information to the firm as it contradicts the Monetary and Credit Law and banking secrecy law.

At the end of the session, members of Parliament endorsed a recommendation that "the accounts of the Banque du Liban, ministries, independent interests, councils, financial institutions, municipalities and all funds undergo a forensic audit in parallel without any hindrances and without invoking banking secrecy or anything else."

The debate in the UNESCO hall reflected a division between the parliamentary blocs. The Progressive Socialist Party, the Amal Movement, and the Future blocs supported "a comprehensive audit of all institutions," while the MPs of the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces insisted on "auditing the accounts of the Banque du Liban first."

The division was reflected in two bills, one of which was submitted by the Lebanese Forces bloc, suspending the banking secrecy law for one year, to be effective from the date of publication of this law in all matters related to financial audits and/or criminal investigations decided by the government on the accounts of the Banque du Liban. The bill of the Amal Movement MPs expands the scope of the forensic audit to include "all ministries, institutions, departments, funds, and councils without exception, discretion, changeability or maliciousness."

The Hezbollah bloc appeared to be the most embarrassed bloc among its two allies, the Amal Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement. The head of the bloc, MP Mohammad Raad, said during the session: "We support the forensic audit of the Banque du Liban, and we agree that the audit will be conducted in all public institutions, and we propose to endorse the temporary suspension of banking secrecy."

FASTFACT

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MP Wael Abou Faour said after the session: "President Aoun tried to hold Parliament responsible for the failure to conduct a criminal investigation, and Parliament responded by endorsing the recommendation to audit all state departments without exception."

The Free Patriotic Movement opposed auditing the accounts of the Energy Ministry, which bears half of the country's public debt. It insisted on auditing the accounts of the central bank. Secretary of the Strong Lebanon bloc, MP Ibrahim Kanaan, said: "The people of Lebanon have the right to know the fate of their deposits."

Future MP Samir Al-Jisr said: "Hassan Diab's Cabinet had endorsed the forensic audit and limited it to the central bank's budget, profit and loss account, and the level of reserves available in foreign currencies. It was not possible to automatically apply the audit to all the state's ministries, departments, institutions and agencies. However, with Parliament's endorsement of the recommendation to include in the audit all the state's ministries, departments, agencies, and institutions, in addition to the Banque du Liban, and turning the recommendation into a law, a financial and forensic audit becomes mandatory."

Activists from the civil movement lobbied MPs to find out the fate of the money deposited in Lebanese banks. They distributed leaflets to passersby and cars, demanding the right to know the truth about the accounts of the Banque du Liban.

The security forces and a number of protesters clashed, injuring a number of those involved, and the Red Cross transferred them to a hospital in the capital.

Another group of the civil movement staged a sit-in outside the office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Jan Kubis, in Baabda. The group delivered a message to Kubis declaring the civil society's rejection of "a state within the state and illegal weapons" and calling for "the possession of weapons and decision of war and peace to be under the control of the Lebanese state alone."

The group said: "Hezbollah, which controls the functions of the state, is the main reason for the political, financial, economic, health, and education collapse as well as the isolation of Lebanon from its Arab and international surroundings."



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ANKARA: Turkey and Qatar on Thursday signed investment deals worth millions of dollars, as part of the developing relationship between the two countries. The external funding will help to alleviate Turkey's currency crisis, which has seen the lira lose about 40 percent of its value this year due to depleted foreign reserves.

But the bilateral ties have sparked a public outcry, with people criticizing the sale of strategic assets to the Gulf nation.

Turkey transferred 10 percent of shares in the Istanbul stock exchange to the Qatar Investment Authority, and the Turkish Wealth Fund's stake in the stock exchange dropped to 80.6 percent as a result.

Qatar, having already poured \$15 billion into currency swap deals, has also bought the transfer of 42 percent of shares in one of Turkey's biggest shopping malls, Istinye Park on Qatar Street in Istanbul, for \$1 billion. It has also pledged to invest in the Istanbul Golden Horn marina project.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party, criticized the government for signing the deals with Qatar, saying that even the sale of the presidential palace to the Gulf country would come as no surprise.

"Where does your love for Qatar come from? Everything is being sold," he said during a TV program on Friday.

Critics see the Qatari investment money as an alarming trend for the Turkish economy, dubbing the agreements as the "best Black Friday deal."

According to Hakan Kara, an economics professor at Bilkent University in Ankara and former chief economist at the Central Bank of Turkey, concentrated funding from a single source mostly driven by personal relationships was at odds with the Turkish government's previous emphasis on "the need to reduce the dependence on foreign capital."

"History shows that such reliance on personal ties may bring compromises in many other areas," he told Arab News.

The agreements will bring \$300 million of capital flows to Turkey. Total investments from Qatar to Turkey have reached \$22 billion.

Dr. Robert C. Mogielnicki, a resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington D.C., said while Qatari economic support for Turkey had been forthcoming in recent years, there were also political dimensions to these initiatives.

"A substantial increase in Qatari equity capital in Turkey has offset declining Saudi and Emirati investments over the years," he told Arab News. "Qatari investments into Turkey spiked from 2015-2016, suggesting that the strengthening of this economic partnership preceded the 2017 Gulf rift and likely had its roots in the earlier 2014 regional dispute."

Although securing new investment deals with Qatar is important for coping with the difficult economic times that Turkey is experiencing, experts have noted the need for economic diversification.

"Turkey still needs to expand and deepen its economic ties with other countries. Qatari-Turkish ties are but one of many linkages needed to support Turkey's massive economy. A big risk for Turkey is that the politicization of its trade and investment deals today limits future opportunities," Mogielnicki added.

According to Timothy Ash, a London-based senior emerging markets strategist at Bluebay Asset Management, the recent deals are part of the long-running strong ties between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's administration and Qatar.

"Although Qatar has proved to be an active and dynamic investor in Turkey, I think that the \$15 billion in financing is not a game changer," he told Arab News. "They are useful but still pale into insignificance compared to Turkey's annual \$200 billion external financing needs. Doha pledged \$15 billion in support to Turkey in 2018. That was supposed to comprise \$5 billion in swaps, \$5 billion in loans and \$5 billion in investments. In the end, the loans were converted to a total of \$10 billion in swaps and I think what we are seeing this week is the investment angle rolled out. I don't think this is new money."



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[Turkish president denies country has a 'Kurdish issue'](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-26 22:14

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan denied the country has a "Kurdish issue," even as he doubled down on his anti-Kurdish stance and accused a politician of being a "terrorist who has blood on his hands."

Erdogan was addressing members of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on Nov. 25 when he made the remarks.

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) launched an insurgency against the state in 1984, and is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the European Union and US. Erdogan accuses the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) of links to the PKK, which it denies.

Erdogan told AKP members that Selahattin Demirtas, the HDP's former co-chair who challenged him in the 2015 presidential elections, was a "terrorist who has blood on his hands."

Demirtas has been behind bars since Nov. 4, 2016, despite court orders calling for his release and faces hundreds of years in prison over charges related to the outlawed PKK.

The president defended the removal of 59 out of 65 elected Kurdish mayors from their posts in the country's Kurdish-majority southeast region since local elections in March 2019.

He also said the AKP would design and implement democratization reforms with its nationalistic coalition partner, which is known for its anti-Kurdish credentials.

His words are likely to disrupt the peace efforts that Turkey has been making with its Kurdish community for years, although they have been baby steps. They could also hint at a tougher policy shift against Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

According to Oxford University Middle East analyst Samuel Ramani, Erdogan's comments should be read as a reaction to Tuesday's resignation of top presidential aide Bulent Arinc, who urged for Demirtas to be released and insisted that the Kurds were repressed within Turkey.

"This gained widespread coverage in the Kurdish media, including in Iraqi Kurdistan's outlet Rudaw which has international viewership," he told Arab News. "Erdogan wanted to stop speculation on this issue."

Ramani said that Erdogan's lack of sensitivity to the Kurdish issue could inflame tensions with Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

"It is also an oblique warning to US President-elect Joe Biden not to try to interfere in Turkish politics by raising the treatment of Kurds within Turkey."

But Erdogan's comments would matter little in the long run, he added.

"Much more will depend on whether Turkey mounts another Operation Peace Spring-style offensive in northern Syria, which is a growing possibility. If that occurs during the Trump to Biden transition period, the incoming Biden administration could be more critical of Turkey and convert its rhetoric on solidarity with the Kurds into action."

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have been a key partner for the US in its fight against Daesh. During a campaign speech in Oct. 2019, Biden criticized the US decision to withdraw from Syria as a "complete failure"

that would leave Syrian Kurds open to aggression from Turkey.

“It’s more insidious than the betrayal of our brave Kurdish partners, it’s more dangerous than taking the boot off the neck of ISIS,” Biden said at the time.

UK-based analyst Bill Park said that Erdogan was increasingly influenced by his coalition partners, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

“He might also believe that both the PKK and the HDP have been so weakened that he doesn’t have to take them into consideration,” he told Arab News. “The Western world will not respond dramatically to this announcement but they are tired of Erdogan. There is little hope that Turkey’s relations with the US or the EU can be much improved. The Syrian Kurdish PYD militia are seeking an accommodation with Damascus, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the largest party in Iraqi Kurdistan, is indifferent to the fate of Turkey’s Kurds and has problems of its own.”

The HDP, meanwhile, is skeptical about Erdogan’s reform pledges and sees them as “politicking.”

“This reform narrative is not sincere,” said HDP lawmaker Meral Danis Bestas, according to a Reuters news agency report. “This is a party which has been in power for 18 years and which has until now totally trampled on the law. It has one aim: To win back the support which has been lost.”

Turkey’s next election is scheduled for 2023, unless there is a snap election in a year.



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[Court orders authorities to reveal Israeli citizenship criteria to Palestinian Jerusalemites](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-26 22:08

AMMAN: An Israeli court has forced state authorities to reveal the criteria that need to be met for Palestinian Jerusalem youth to become citizens of Israel.

The judicial order will mean that approximately 20,000 Palestinians aged between 18 and 21 living in East Jerusalem will now know the requirements when petitioning for Israeli citizenship, which is not automatically granted to them as residents of the city.

The vast majority of Jerusalem's 330,000 stateless Palestinians have not applied, nor have the desire, to become Israelis. But the court decision should in future make the application process easier for those interested in carrying an Israeli passport and having the protection of the Israeli government regarding their legal status.

Jerusalem attorney, Mohammed Dahdal, who has practiced civil and human rights law for more than 30 years, noted that without Israeli citizenship, residents of East Jerusalem could not obtain an Israeli passport, vote in national elections, or work in state government jobs, among other things.

However, they did pay taxes to Israel and received social benefits such as national insurance, unemployment payments, and healthcare coverage.

Dahdal told Arab News that after 1988, when Jordan disengaged from the West Bank, which included East Jerusalem, Jerusalemites became stateless citizens. He said the ruling had come about after a Palestinian from Jerusalem had appealed to the court after revealing a loophole in the law.

He noted that the court decision, published by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior, made four conditions to ensure receipt of an Israeli passport. "That the applicant has no other citizenship, that they were born in Israel (for Israel, East and West Jerusalem are both parts of Israel), that the applicant is between 18 and 21 years old, and has lived continuously in Israel during the five years preceding applying for citizenship."

The lawyer added that the Israeli government had fought in court to have the criteria for citizenship kept under wraps.

Former Jordanian member of parliament, Audeh Kawwas, who was on Wednesday appointed as a member of the Jordanian Senate, told Arab News: "If the aim is to solve the statelessness issue of Jerusalemites, I am for it and I have spoken about it (as a committee member) in the World Council of Churches.

"However, if this is an attempt to disenfranchise Palestinians and to make the city more Israeli, then I am totally opposed."

Hazem Kawasmi, a community activist in Jerusalem, told Arab News that many young Palestinian Jerusalemites were in a desperate situation, as no government or institution was taking care of them and their needs.

He said: "They are living under occupation with daily harassment from the police and Israeli intelligence and face all kinds of racism and enmity.

"Israeli citizenship helps them get high-skilled jobs and it is a prerequisite for many jobs. It helps them travel for tourism or work to Europe and the US without the cumbersome, complicated procedures of getting visas, that is if they get it at all.

"Finally, Israeli citizenship makes the youth feel safe not to lose their residency in Jerusalem and movement and work in Israel," he added.

Khalil Assali, a member of the Jerusalem Waqf and an observer of Jerusalem affairs, told Arab News that he was doubtful that Israel would speed up the process for granting Israeli citizenship. "They have made this move to show their newly established Arab friends that they are acting democratically."

Hijazi Rishq, head of the Jerusalem Merchants' committee, told Arab News that the Israelis were looking for ways to turn the city into a Jewish one. By giving citizenship to youth between the ages of 18 and 21, Israel was aiming to deter them from carrying out hostile acts against Israel and keep them away from the Palestinian National Authority and its security forces, he said.

Jerusalem-based human rights activist, Rifaat Kassis, said: "The idea that Jerusalem is Arab has become an empty slogan. Meanwhile, Israeli racism has become the overriding power that forces Jerusalemites trying to have a dignified life with their families to live under difficult conditions."



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[North Yemen fighting forces thousands to flee since January](#)

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA: More than 19,000 families have fled their homes in northern Yemen since January due to fighting between government forces and the Houthis, according to official figures.

The Iran-backed militia has increased its attacks on government-controlled areas in the provinces of Marib, Jouf and Sanaa since early this year, leading people to desert their homes and settle in camps and makeshift houses in and around the densely populated city of Marib.

In November alone around 200 displaced families were forced to escape from

their camps in Raghwan district, outside Marib city, as the Houthis increased their missile attacks and shelling to weaken government forces, the internationally recognized government's Executive Unit for IDPs Camps said in a report released on Nov. 20.

"Some of the displaced people were forced into running away from homes and displacement camps three or four times," Najeeb Al-Saadi, the unit's head, told Arab News on Thursday.

The latest fighting outside Marib has pushed the number of displaced people in the city to 1.2 million since early 2015, representing almost 45 percent of the displaced people in Yemen.

Al-Saadi said 8,000 people, who had previously lived in Majazer district in northern Marib and Al-Khaneq camp in Sanaa's Nehim after fleeing Houthi-controlled territories in 2015, were forced to seek refuge after the Houthis made major territorial gains in Marib and Sanaa.

Those families were forced again into heading to Marib's downtown area as fighting and shelling rocked camps.

"Humanitarian interventions are inadequate compared to the big number of displaced people," Al-Saadi added, urging the UN to pressure the warring factions to stop fighting in Marib.

If the Houthis invaded Marib, he warned, more than a million people would be displaced from the city, causing a major humanitarian crisis. "We should all work on preventing the war from getting closer to displacement camps which could trigger a huge displacement and no one would be able to help them."

Marib has enjoyed peace and stability since the beginning of the war, attracting tens of thousands of people who have fled Houthi repression. The Houthis have increased their attacks on the city through drones, ballistic missiles and mortar rounds.

Local army commanders believe that hundreds of Houthis, including field commanders, have been killed in fighting with army troops and allied tribesmen during the last couple of months.

During his visit to Marib in March, the UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths called for attacks on Marib to stop and to keep the city as an oasis for peace and stability. "Marib must be insulated from conflict, remain a haven for Yemenis and continue its path to development and prosperity," Griffiths said.

On Thursday the governor of Marib, Sultan Al-Arada, told Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmer that the army and local tribesmen had scored victories on the battlefield and foiled Houthi "terrorist" attacks on the city, the official Saba news agency reported.

In Sanaa the Houthis held funeral processions for their fighters, including senior field commanders, who were killed in fighting with government forces or by Arab coalition warplanes.

Also in Sanaa, a Houthi-controlled court on Wednesday sentenced 91 people to death and ordered their properties to be confiscated, accusing them of supporting the coalition's military operations.

The convicted include: Nadia Al-Sakkaf, the former information minister and editor of the Sanaa-based Yemen Times, Ahmed Lamlis, the governor of Aden, Rajeh Badi, a government spokesperson, Jamel Aiz Addin, Yemen state TV director, senior military and security officers, journalists, activists and ambassadors.



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